

COMMUNAL RESPONSE IN IFITE-OGWARI: AN EXAMPLE OF PHILOSOPHY OF ASSISTANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

One of the undeniable fates of human beings is that he must live in society. This associational nature of man makes it imperative that there must be interactions with other human beings. Many outcomes must result in the course of this intercourse. One of them is that society's device means through which certain obligations are expected of its members for smooth cohabitation. in Ifite-Ogwari, rural community in Anambra State of Nigeria, the culture of communal response during difficult and/or trying periods has become a way of life so much so that people may even discomfort themselves to attend to a member or a group of people who are in need of assistance to the point that difficult and hard sacrifices may be made. This paper looked at some of these sacrifices the people make in the bid to come to the rescue of those needing them. By applying hermeneutics, the work discovered that it is the spirit of brotherliness (nwenem) that propels the supportive inclination of the people. This work recommends that this spirit, expressed in diverse forms and nomenclatures across all of Africa, should be revived in this era of selfishness in the guise of tribalism, segregation, discrimination, racism and all other tendencies that highlight the differences in human beings instead of our oneness.

Keywords: altruism, assistance, communal/community, development, sacrifice

Introduction

Human beings have been crafted and designed to live in societies¹. Many a treatise has been written on this. By his nature, no man can live alone because none can attend to all the needs, necessities and requirements of this life². More so, the chemical and biological constitution of humans, purportedly hyper advanced above that of other creatures³, makes it imperative that he must continually be in association, and isolation is privation of what it means to be a holistic man. Isolation is a problem.

In order to live with other human beings, many theories were enunciated by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and various other disciplines that deal with human interpersonal relationship and framework. The social contract theorists developed the emergence of the civil society from a crude setting, and discussed the place of the people in its formation, growth and sustenance⁵. The legal theorists discussed the role of rules in ensuring checks and balances in the affairs of the people⁶. The religionists and theologians expounded the role of the divine in the affairs of men, and man's reciprocal duty to ensure sanity and morality in the order of the created world⁷. The educationists want us to believe that our character can be groomed positively by the impartation of certain principles and ideologies⁸. There are many other areas of human endeavors through which man tries to see how he can ensure that the society, to which he is bond to inhabit, is made conducive for him-self and others. The aim of all these attempts is to ensure that friction is reduced to the barest minimum, so that all human beings can live peacefully and achieve whatever target each sets his mind upon.

However lofty these ideals are, bifurcation into opposites has always been an undeniable fact of existence⁹. There is always the positive and the negative, the bitter and the sweet, male and female, good and bad, right and wrong, among many other innumerable conglomerations of opposites. Each of these situations must be handled in its peculiar way, or the result may be catastrophic. The situation may be organic or inorganic, but humans are expected to live with them and handle them in their benefitting way, for life to move on. It is in this regard that various people, without prior and general agreement and consent, developed response situations and machineries to deal with any condition that threatens the smooth functioning of their space and time. The response is meant to correct an anomaly that may adversely affect many people if people are lackadaisical about them.

The global community, because of the generic term of humanity, has come to terms with this notion that communal assistance and response is an inextricable responsibility of all and sundry. Nobody is taught to come to the rescue of a person in need. However, current trend gradually creeping in is worrisome. Instead of helping people in need, some individuals will be filming a helpless individual and sharing to social media, letting a person that should ordinarily be saved perishes. This action begs the question if the ancient days of prompt response are not better than this present technological age where people choose to popularize an event instead of lifting up a helping hand to salvage a situation.

Ifite-Ogwari is used here symbolically as a microcosmic environment to mirror the many ways the African devised means of communal responses. Definitely, there are differing and varying degrees, structures and instruments set up for communal assistance, but the purpose meant to be achieved may be comparatively and minutely at variance from the purpose set

out by people of other cultures and climes. The effort of all and sundry, without being given any prior notice, will be examined from an Ifite-Ogwari Africa point of departure.

Instances of Communal Response

Communal response in Ifite-Ogwari takes many forms and manners, but for the sake of the nature of this work, only five of such instances will be examined.

Oku awolu unọ

The traditional dwelling place of the Ifite-Ogwari man is a square building made from red mud for building bricks, and a thatch roof. It is always a cool house. This building contains all the belongings of a man or a family.

The thatch that serves as the roof is made from dried grass, specifically *hyparrhennia hirta*, also known as common reed, or any of its family members. By its very nature, being a grass, it is highly inflammable and can catch fire at slightest instance, more so during dry seasons.

The traditional setting of the specimen community is such that there was no wall fencing in the entire community. People used to interact closely with their neighbours so that help can be rendered whenever it is needed. It is in this regard that the *oku awolu unọ* phenomenon was born.

The phrase *oku awolu unọ* literally means a “house is on fire”. This cry of summon is given by the very first person who witnessed a thatched house being gutted by fire. Immediately this shout is heard, every neighbor will rush with water and begin to throw it at the flaming house roof, to extinguish the fire.

Utụ tọlọ tọlọ

“*Tọlọ*” is the traditional name given to what may be called “mite” today. It is one of the smallest amounts of money in yonder years. It can be afforded by everyone, no matter how poor the person is. This communal response was developed as a means through which married women assist their brothers to cover up the expenses that may be incurred in the course of unveiling a masquerade. In the Ifite-Ogwari African world, masquerades are of masculine concern. But in Ifite-Ogwari, “*Umuada*” contribute to financing the masquerades from their maiden homes, after all, it was a woman that gave birth to the men that follow the masquerade.

Ibọ ezi

The traditional setting of the community is rural, situated among the riverine axis. This makes it imperative that dwellers were mostly farmers, fishermen, and a little of animal rearers.

The roads leading to farms and fishing spots, more often than not, are always overrun with grass. This becomes a sort of obstruction to free movement. The people devised a means through which all able-bodied youth are summoned, once in a while as the need arises, to come out with their hoes, cutlasses and matchets, to repair the road for passers-by to make use of with ease.

Iluunọ

No individual in Ifite-Ogwari builds his house alone, nor does he pay for the erection of the building. Whenever one is set to erect the thatched mud building, he tells his age mates, friends, and female relatives. On the first day, all the female relatives will be fetching water, whereas the male age mates and friends will be digging up red mud and use the fetched water to mould the blocks. When enough quantity of blocks has been molded, depending on the size of the conceived building, they will be entertained, and a date set to begin the construction proper.

On the day the construction will begin, the male helpers will see to it that the building is constructed from the foundation to the finish, all in one day, while the female helpers will fetch all the water needed for the work. On all the days the work is being done, the females who fetch the water also do the cooking.

Igbamkpu

Whenever someone in the community has any reason to invite people for any occasion, be it a joyful or a sorrowful event, every invited guest attending knows what to do. The host will provide the basic entertainment, after which the guests will contribute money to support their host for the expenses he has incurred, and they will also contribute money to entertain themselves. The guests do not depend on the host to provide all the entertainment and refreshment needed.

Ethno-philosophical Bases for these Communal Response Frameworks

Having narrated the above incidences, we shall now examine the philosophical foundations that informed the above actions, reactions, and interactions. We shall thereafter compare it with what obtains in our contemporary society and across some other cultures.

The traditional Ifite-Ogwari African man believes so much in the community. What affects an individual has a way of affecting the entire community, if nothing is done about it. If the effect is not immediate, it may come later, but it must surely come.

From this perspective, if a mud thatched house is on fire, every available water has to be used to extinguish it. No one is forced to bring out their water. No one is told the type of water to bring. Every available water has to be used. The reason behind this act is that a human being is in pain and needs assistance. Today, it is this man. Nobody knows who it

will be tomorrow. That knowledge that there is the tendency for the fate to befall anymore unannounced drives people to rescue the affected person.

Closely related to the above is the fact that many people aided in the construction of the building being gutted by fire. Since it was a communal effort that affected the building, communal effort should also be given in salvaging it from an inferno. This brings out the concept of “*ichu aja*”- literally sacrifice - to the fore front. “*Ichu aja*” here implies the denial of a thing to oneself in order to attend to another need¹⁰. This comes to play in communal responses of the community in many angles. In the area of extinguishing fire from a building under attack, it has to be pointed out that the community under study has many sources of water supply. Some of the water supplies are good only for washing and cleaning, and not for cooking or drinking. The water bodies that are drinkable are at the outskirts of the community. Sometimes, people have to be there as early as first cock crow (around 4am) to avoid long queues. On an unlucky day, one may be there by that time and still meet a sizeable long queue all the same. This, notwithstanding, is not a reason for him or her to refuse to take that hard-to-get water to extinguish the fire. One may even be carrying the water on the way home, and hears the cry for help. The person has no option than to run to the direction of the cry and give up the water so fetched to solve another’s need.

One may wonder why that should be the case. Why can’t the water fetcher ignore the cry and just go home and allow others to do the needful. According to people’s experience, a house on fire has the tendency to ignite other nearby houses if the wind blows the fire in different directions. There is also the tendency that the wind may blow a patch of the thatch and drop it on some other building and the fire will escalate. Who knows the house(s) that may be affected? So, instead of enjoying the water fetched and maybe later finding one’s house at the danger of the same inferno he shuts himself out of, it is better to do the needful and bear some little discomfort instead of living in a temporary euphoria and much regret later on.

In all the other instances of communal assistance studied here, namely “*utu tolo tolo*”, “*ibọ ezi*”, “*ilu unọ*”, and “*igba mkpu*”, sacrifices are made in each and every one of them. Individuals sacrifice their time, energy, resources, among others, for the good of another person, because what affects one, positively or negatively, affects other. If it does not affect one immediately, it might happen in the future. And whatever one does, others are taking note, and recompense must surely come.

Another basis for this communal response is altruism. There is this selfless concern for the welfare of others at the expense of one’s comfort¹¹. Evolutionary scientists have opined that altruism is deep rooted in the nature of human beings because cooperation and giving

helping-hands promote the survival of the specie called humankind¹². This is why people should go out of their way to inconvenience themselves and give up their hard-earned human and material resources to come to the rescue of an individual or a group that needs assistance.

For the Ifite-Ogwari African man, nobody needs to do everything alone. Virtually, if not everything, has to be done by all and sundry. The act of sharing, with the intention of ameliorating a person's burden, is implied by the notion of assistance¹³. Money, information, resources, among others, have to be provided whenever the need arises, with the sole purpose of helping to solve an appropriate need. Individualistic inclination is sternly frowned at, because no one can isolate himself from others.

In the light of a popular maxim, man must live in a community. "*Ibuanyidanda*" is a popular vernacular maxim of the people, which roughly translates the saying that "together, we can do great things". "*Danda*" is the white ant. Asa group, they left up big burdens which individual ants cannot carry on their own.

On the need to live together with other human beings in a community, story is told of a man who detests communal living because he does not want anyone's trouble and disturbance. He went inside the bush and cleared a large expanse of land and erected his own dwelling place there. He made it right to his taste, in his own understanding. One fateful day, a kite snatched someone's cock and devoured it in his compound. The owner of the cock and well-wishers searched for the missing cock everywhere and could not find it. Someone suggested that they should visit the solitary man who lives in the wilderness. They went to the man's abode, discovered the scattered feathers, and accused him of separating himself from the community for the sole purpose of concealing his thieving ventures. To prove his innocence, the man saw the need to relocate and mingle with others.

The concept of community – *ibiko ọ̀nụ* – can be clearly seen in the traditional lifestyles of the community. In the entire community, you cannot see any kind of fence on even a single compound. A person's backyard is another person's footpath or even frontage. The idea behind this is for ease of assistance wherever and whenever the need arises. Fencing a compound is seen as a sort of isolation, wickedness and anti-communal. It is isolation because the owner of a fenced compound does not want to interact with others. It is wickedness because he does not want others to see what happens inside his compound, does not want to associate with others for some negative reasons, or that he does not want people to know when he is around to avoid people knowing his whereabouts whenever the need to help others comes. It may also portray a sort of beastliness. The community incorporates everybody. Any anti-communal disposition is a beastly behavior because no man is self-sufficient. The analogy of the snake is used here. If snakes live in communities, there is no

animal that can withstand them. But because they live solitary lives, it is easy to pick them up one by one.

Another basis for communal response in the sample community is development. Strange as it may sound, the people believe that no meaningful development can occur in a state where individuals mind their own private endeavors without giving any thought on what becomes of their fellow human beings. The life of man must witness many ups and downs. Like the famous philosopher said, a tree that falls down in a wilderness where no human being heard the noise may be said to have not made any noise¹⁴. By implication, it is fellow human that must celebrate good things or bemoan woeful states. It is human beings that must work concertedly for rapid and meaningful development to take place.

In the few samples of communal response given above, we see the areas the people come together as a body, some with invitation and others out of necessity and without any formal invitation, just a reflex action, to help in solving a problem. If those problems remain unsolved, it may escalate and negatively affect more people, thus setting developmental stride backwards.

Man is bent on striving to “improve” his state of being. Innovations are part of the way human beings seek to introduce lifestyles and gadgets which he thinks will help in making his life better. Having looked at the traditional lifestyles and bases for the concatenated attempts of the Ifite-Ogwari African man to rapidly and concertedly respond to issues as they rise, let us attempt to look at contemporary situation orchestrated by “technology” and acculturated *modus videndi*.

Contemporary Response in Needful Times

The situation to be briefly discussed below is not peculiar to Ifite-Ogwari, but to many other communities. Without intending to sound apologetic or retrogressive, it should be noted that development is a welcome aspect of life. But, in the bid to develop, there are certain things that should not be completely erased. A boy grows and develops from an infant to an aged man. He undergoes many developmental stages. But he need not lose his personal identity. This should always be at the back of people’s minds.

The contemporary society is awash with news of people using their camera phone to video incidents but doing nothing to salvage the situation. If a house is under an inferno, the social media will carry the news, reporting live and direct, while the reporter is doing absolutely nothing to extinguish the fire. Without going into many other instances, the contemporary man will video a drawing man, a bullet ridden person, an accident victim, among others, without any intention to help in saving a life. Instead of saving the situation, lives which could be saved, are left to be taken away under the lenses of the camera. Why should that

be the case? Looking at such a situation, is it not proper and appropriate to aver that the traditional society is better at showing concern than the present technologically advanced age, at least in this regard?

Traditional societies are becoming increasingly modern as days go by. Intercourse with other cultures, rural urban migration, and postmodernism, advancements in science and technology, and ideological shifts are creeping in gradually and are affecting the people's frame of mind¹⁵. All the apparatus set in place by the traditional institutions are being eroded. There is a growing sense of individualism and self-centeredness. People now think of themselves first before considering the interest of others, not minding the laudability or otherwise of their choices.

On the bright side, scientific and technological advancements have helped in replacing some of the traditional institution with more convenient situations. The traditional thatched house is now replaced with modern buildings, and one erects his buildings to his taste and according to his resources. The traditional "*ibọ ezi*" is gradually dying as tarred roads are making our roads better and more accessible to users. These notwithstanding, all roads cannot be tarred. There is still the need to clear some inner tracks leading to interior places. There is also the need to attend to other areas of need as they arise.

Conclusion

In as much as change is constant, societies must surely change and man must adapt to the changing scenes as they come. This fact is undeniable. However, there are some ideologies that must be immortalized, even amidst the changing scenes of life. One of these is the need for man to know that he cannot survive alone in the society. Man needs fellow men to live and survive. This need must translate into actions, which one must willingly give, to ensure that it is well with everybody in the society.

For the above need to be communally possible, each individual in the society must see the need to care about the other person even at his own expense and discomfort. Personal gains and benefits must be deemphasized. The Igbo people have a saying, "*umunna nwezue akụ, ilo anaa*" - when everybody in a kindred is wealthy, unhealthy rivalry will cease. This spirit, which was at the traditional background of the people, must not be allowed to die. The embers must be blown into flames again. The people must replace unnecessary zest for popularity - the hallmark of individualism - with the need to carry everybody along.

Finally, man should be willing to make sacrifices for the good of others. "*Nwata chọba sọ nke ya, ọ bụrụ ajoy nwa*" - if a child seeks only for his own, he become a bad child. "*Nke m dị iche bụ ajoy aha*" - my own is different is a bad name. Anything the Ifite-Ogwari African man does from individualistic orientation and for individualistic end is seriously frowned

at. Hence the saying that “anyuko mamirionu, o gbooufufu” – if you urinate at a spot instead of scattering your urine, it will foam.

ENDNOTES

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